DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 307 720 EA 021 059

AUTHOR Strouse, Jean
TITLE Educational Policy and the Hmong.
PUB DATE Mar 89
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, CA, March 27-31, 1989).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Acculturation; Adult Education; *Adult Literacy; *Educational Policy; Educational Practices; Elementary Secondary Education; Ethnicity; Ethnic Origins; *Ethnic Relations; *Hmong People; Immigrants; Refugees; *Social Integration

ABSTRACT

For a number of reasons, U.S. educational policy has failed to integrate the Hmong into the mainstream of American life. First, lacking transferrable job skills, the Hmong were further disadvantaged by the inability of public schools and contracted English-as-a-Second-Language schools to assimilate traditional Hmong culture with new settlement circumstances. Second, the schools failed to keep Hmong adults enrolled. The English language curriculum was not suitable for preliterate adults. Third, the schools lacked sensitivity to the Hmong's poverty and absence of choice. For instance, women with children attended fewer classes because of either prohibitive costs or the relative absence of such services. A reorientation in educational policy toward the Hmong that demonstrates sensitivity and respect for Hmong culture would help to alleviate the social and economic stratification that plagues this new ethnic community. (JAM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 307720

EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND THE HMONG

A Paper Presented at:

American Educational Research Association
San Francisco, California

March 27-31, 1989

Joan Strouse
Associate Professor
Educational Policy, Foundations, &
Administrative Studies Department
Portland State University
Portland, OR 97207
(503) 464-4621

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Joan Strouse

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

EA 021 059

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Educational Policy and the Hmong

The Hmong are a closely-knit, agricultural, tribal people who have historically lived in certain hilly regions of Laos. Their language has recently been provided with an alphabet, but few Hmong are literate. Their region in Laos is about as distant, culturally as well as geographically, as it is possible to get from their new place of residence.

Yet, beginning in the mid-1970s, sixty thousand Hmong--probably a majority of the Hmong--were airlifted to the United States. They came not to join families, or to supply skills America needed, or because they had become enamored of some version of the American Dream--the standard reasons for immigration. Instead, their arrival here was a consequence of American military ventures in the Indochina War. The Hmong had been recruited by the CIA to serve as mercenaries against rebel forces in that region (Kourman, 1979; Catlin and Beck, 1981). After the rebels won, the Hmong had to leave; the U.S. government, acknowledging responsibility for their uprooting decided to absorb them into the American public. Few migrations have required as much cultural adjustment as that of the Hmong in their recent evacuation to the United States.

Thus, immigration policy, in this instance, became a part of foreign and military policy. As the definition of the word "refugee" is determined by the friendliness of the foreign government, and as the United States increases its use of foreign surrogates to carry out its various covert and overt military initiatives around the world, the linkages among policies are becoming the norm.

The politicization and militarization of refugee policy, however, stopped at the U.S. border. Although foreign policy considerations determined who would be admitted and when, what happened to the refugees thereafter would be determined by domestic considerations. Two factors largely shaped the resettlement policy that resulted. First, the federal government wanted to prevent scenarios in which the refugees became an annoyance or burden to communities, since this might undermine public support for the foreign policies that resulted in the resettlement (Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy, 1981). The other factor was the weight of tradition. The U.S. is a nation of immigrants, and its tradition includes a certain stance toward new entrants.

The result was a policy that attempted to rapidly transform the Hmong individual from what he or she was--a member of a distant Asian hill tribe--into a socially integrated, English-speaking, self-supporting American citizen (U.S. Congress, 1980). The Hmong were to be dispersed among the U.S. population, and enclaves were discouraged. Federal support for resettlement had

a short, 18-month time limit. The schools, the nation's chosen instrument of assimilation, were called upon to bring about the cultural transformation.

A key component of the school's role involves the single-minded insistence on English. The dominant theory, that of "Anglo-conformity" (Gordon, 1964), rests on certain questionable assumptions about the newcomer's real needs, and upon a particular, nativist conception of success in American civil life. What success these policies may have had in achieving some of their goals came at a great cost to the immigrant students and, ultimately, to American society.

The failures of assimilationist educational policies--their barely hidden disdain for foreign cultures, their insistence on the primacy of white, middle-class America over other native cultures, the disablement of the immigrant student that results from a refusal to encourage ethnic life--have been known for some time. Current official rhetoric is wiser and more tolerant. Yet, the same mistakes were made over again in the case of the Hmong, with increasingly serious consequences.

The encounter between the Hmong and the U.S. educational system can be regarded as a case study of the capacity of the American system for accommodating differentness and for responding to the needs of what are, in a number of ways, the neediest students. Extreme cases such as the Hmong reveal the system's inherent incapacities and failings.

A case can also be made for the importance of studying the Hmong in their own right. This minority Laotian hill tribe became an American responsibility at the time that our agents recruited them to work as mercenaries in the Vietnam war. The evacuation of many Hmong at war's end fulfilled only a part of the implicit promise made to them. Even if it is not yet our legal responsibility, it is certainly our moral obligation to prevent the rescue from resulting in social and psychological disaster.

Federal Intentions and Educational Reality

The Federal government cannot be accused of failing to plan for the Hmong. There was a plan. It resulted from meetings, commissions, and many hours of staff time (Barnes, 1977). The government, having considered and rejected the possibility of resettlement into Hmong enclaves, decided that the Hmong would be integrated immediately into mainstream American society. The refugees were to be dispersed, directed to the responsibility of sponsors, partly in order to avoid "burdening" communities with more than their "fair share" of refugees, and partly, one suspects, in order to hasten the objective of culturally transforming the refugees. The government provided financial support for 18 months (shortened from the original 36) after which, it was assumed, the refugees would be able to fend for

themselves in the American labor market. The key to long-term adjustment was the public school system, which would turn out English-speaking Americans whose heritage--being, at most, one generation away from an ethnic past as illiterate, agricultural, culturally isolated members of an Asian hill tribe--would presumably be little hindrance in the drive for success in the new land of opportunity. That plan did not succeed. Though the refugees had little control over their fate, they soon found the means to defeat the plan in evey particular and, simultaneously, to take steps toward fulfilling those of their needs not addressed by the Federal policy.

First, they clustered. Many communities lost their Hmong while others sprouted Hmong neighborhoods. Then the Hmong, like other immigrants before them, set up community institutions that eased the burden of adjustment and provided a measure of familiarity in an otherwise wholly alien environment. Second, they failed to conform. It was obviously impossible for the Hmong to live like their agrarian ancestors, but they seem to have tried. In cities, the Hmong seized every opportunity to use garden plots wherever they could be found and then planted a variety of potted herbs and spices in their windows. On the negative side, the Hmong adults remain largely illiterate, and few speak any language but that which they used in Laos.

As a result, the Hmong have failed to "make it" in their new urban American home. Lacking any transferable job skills, they remain largely unemployed. Even the few who have found work are paid so little that they and their families are dependent on various forms of cash assistance. For all but a handful, the America so familiar to many of us is an utterly foreign, inscrutable and, in many ways, terrifying environment (Morin, 1983; Kaufman, 1984).

The job of the schools was to find the means to reach across this gap and provide access to the larger society. The current state of the Hmong demonstrates that with respect to this assigned mission, the schools have failed. What follows is an attempt to describe this failure and to relate it to historical problems in the schools' assimilationist strategies.

First, and perhaps foremost, the schools did not even attempt to shore up the Hmong people's most important asset--the traditional Hmong culture. In the view of American educators, their role was to provide a new, substitute culture, one which would permit the Hmong to function in a society radically different from that which they had previously known. But this attitude, in combination with the federal policy of dispersal, robbed the Hmong of a home base. Like others adjusting to a radical change of circumstances, the Hmong needed a sort of halfway house, a protected retreat with enough familiar and friendly features to permit them to relax and to prepare themselves for the next day's toil of adjustment. The attempt to reshape the Hmong within 18 months virtually assured their

failure. Given their outlook--quite understandable in view of the history of immigrants--educators would have regarded as self-defeating any attempt to provide classes in Hmong, or otherwise to encourage Hmong-directed learning. In fact, it would have been a powerful force for adjustment.

Second, the schools failed to keep the Hmong adults enrolled. It is essential to lay the blame for this failure on the schools rather than on the Hmong. Given their level of distress, we can safely assume that they would have made good use of means for improving their lot, if these had been accessible and ethnically appropriate. Too often the curriculum they encountered was not at all suitable for illiterates and certainly did not take into account the enormous cultural gap that was the Hmong's primary reality in this country.

Third, the schools failed the Hmong, as they had many other immigrants before them, by lacking sensitivity both to their poverty and to their absence of choice. For example, during the days, the Hmong lacked any way to arrange for child care. Because of the policy of dispersal, they could not pool their efforts, and their unfamiliarity with the English language and with American customs (plus their lack of money) precluded their finding acceptable alternatives. The result was that women with small children attended fewer classes (Downing and Olney, 1982).

Fourth, while the schools were supposed to be preparing the Hmong for entry into the U.S. labor market, they only managed to provide a few links in what needed to be a long chain of preparatory events. The Hmong were not provided with that most basic asset, a sense of what job or career they might want or toward which they might aspire. When the Hmong arrived in this country, they had no idea what sorts of jobs people had, let alone which were feasible or desirable or what had to be done in the way of preparation. Several years later, most Hmong adults are still unable to articulate their job or career goals.

Current official rhetoric is wiser and more tolerant, yet the same mistakes were made again.

Although this list can be extended further, presumably the point has been made. More than for other immigrants, it was necessary for educators to develop an informed, comprehensive understanding of the needs of the Hmong as they themselves saw them; the Hmong needed a sensitive, tolerant, and understanding response from the schools. They got none of this. As a result, they continue to endure isolation and deprivation.

A better educational policy for refugees and other immigrants would require that authorities embrace a pluralistic vision of American society. "American" does not mean middle-class white Protestant. And although nearly all educational policymakers know this by now, they continue to create and implement policies that derive from the era when this definition

was commonplace. In my opinion, ethnic America is not only an empirical reality but a social good. Ethnicity provides a cultural base for people of varied backgrounds and capacities, and there is little that can compensate these people for its loss. This is especially true for the first and second generations in any national migration. With respect to educational policies pertaining to newcomers, a forthright decision to buttress ethnic identity and culture, rather than to regard these as the enemies of successful adjustment, would set most matters right.

Such a re-orientation would precipitate any number of specific policies. The schools would have to train staff to "see" the local community through the eyes of the immigrant. Patient data-collection would reveal the particular problems that the immigrants in a given locale faced in their efforts to obtain jobs and job training. The information so obtained would make it possible to design educational programs that responded to the immigrant's actual needs. Similarly, the educational authorities would be in a better position to adopt measures to encourage the development of institutions within the budding ethnic community.

The schools are not complete social service agencies, and it is neither fair nor constructive to blame the schools for all the troubles of any group in need. Nevertheless, it is clear that many of the most important problems faced by the Hmong refugees were created or left unsolved because of insensitivities inherent in the Americanizing, Anglo-conformity ideology of the public schools. While what has happened to the Hmong was perhaps predictable, in light of the experience of many generations of earlier immigrants, it is also tragic; it demonstrates that we have learned little from our past mistakes.

References

Barnes, T. (1977). *Of all the 36 alternatives: Indochinese resettlement in America.* Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, Senior Seminar in Foreign Policy.

Catlin, A., & Beck, S. (1981). *The Hmong from Asia to Providence.* Providence, R.I.: Roger Williams Park Museum Publication.

Downing, B., & Olney, D., (eds). (1982). *The Hmong in the West.* Minneapolis: Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, Univ. of Minnesota.

Gordon, M. (1964). *Assimilation in American life: The role of race, religion and national origins.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Kaufman, M. (1984). The last victims of Vietnam? *The Philadelphia Inquirer.* July 1, pp. 1, 14, and 15.

5

Le, K., & Bui, D. (1981). The Indochinese mutual assistance associations in the 1980s: Roles and responsibilities. Paper presented to the 1981 National Governor's Association Refugee Resettlement Conference, Washington, D.C.

Morin, S. (1983). Many Hmong, puzzled by life in U.S. yearn for old days in Laos. *The Wall Street Journal.* February 16, pp. 1 and 15.

Selected Commission of Immigration and Refugee Policy. (1981). *U.S. Immigration Policy and the National Interest.* Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.

U.S. Congress, House. (1980). *Refugee Act of 1980.* Publ L. 96-212, 96th Congress, 2nd session.